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PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE--HONORS PROGRAM.

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TO PROVIDE ADEQUATE INSTRUCTION FOR SUPERIOR STUDENTS THE FRESHMAN ENGLISH HONORS PROGRAM AT LENOIR RHYNE COLLEGE, NORTH CAROLINA, WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1965. THE NEED FOR LONG RANGE EVALUATION AND THE PRESENT METHOD OF EVALUATING THE HONORS PROGRAM ARE DISCUSSED. A BRIEF DESCRIPTION IS ALSO GIVEN OF THE METHOD BY WHICH HONOR STUDENTS ARE SELECTED AND THE ARRANGEMENTS MADE TO COORDINATE THE FRESHMAN PROGRAM WITH HONORS PROGRAMS ON ALL LEVELS. IN CONCLUSION, THE IMPORTANCE OF PROVIDING FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE AND SPECIAL PROGRAMS FOR THE SUPERIOR STUDENT IS EMPHASIZED. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "NORTH CAROLINA ENGLISH TEACHER," VOLUME 25, NUMBER 2, JANUARY 1968, PAGES 8-15. (BN)

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Pursuit of Excellence: Honors Program*

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On May 13, 1965, the Department of English decided unanimously in a departmental meeting to initiate an honors program at Lenoir Rhyne College on the freshman level. The plan was submitted to the administration on May 16, 1965 for approval. The first freshman honors course was offered in 1965-66 and has been offered ever since. At the same time a non-credit independent study project — "A Reading Program for the Prospective Graduate Student in English" — was drawn up by the English Department and has since 1965 been available to interested students. It includes bibliographies of important titles in world, English, and American literature. General research and reference tools in the field of English and literature are also recommended in this ten-page program.

We had discussed the honors program in detail for months, conducted a survey of honors programs in other colleges, and came to the conclusion that the most important thing to do was to *begin* with a good program instead of continuing talking and dreaming of a perfect one. We realized, as one scoffer puts it, "that two years of committee (or departmental) meetings on one topic can guarantee the death of anything and everything but the members of the committee." We wanted also to avoid the mistakes of many other institutions which, before 1956, offered honors programs on the junior and senior levels only, in other words to those brilliant students who had successfully survived two years or boredom and neglect. We wanted to challenge the superior student immediately when entering college and throughout his four undergraduate years. We agree with S. J. Irzerda that "the typical high-school graduate expects a radical disjuncture between high-school and college life in terms of intellectual level, expectation of performance on the part of the faculty, and competition from his peers. The more serious and the more capable student not only expects these changes, he hopes for them. What a pity that each year thousands of young

*This article represents a major portion of the principal address delivered by Dr. Heymann at the Annual Fall Meeting in Hickory on November 4, 1967.

students, in hundreds of colleges and universities, have these expectations crushed within three months after they begin their college life."

Confronted by great numbers of students and the need to communicate effectively with them, the modern teacher in our colleges — and even more so in our high schools I dare say — is forced to gear his instruction to the level of the average — that average which is not bad but still the enemy of the best. The honors student in an average class has no intellectual problems handling the class work, but the conformity to average goals and abilities too frequently frustrates the superior student. He may become bored or even disgusted, and may be found among those who transfer early in the hope of finding the expected challenge elsewhere. The least fault lies with the student! In our honors program, however, the superior student is immediately engaged to his fullest reach. "He experiences a type of intellectual liberation," a challenge to critical thinking and creative and imaginative work. Most importantly, this student now can look forward to participating in a continuous and extending range of parallel experiences throughout his four undergraduate years.

This program offers him, furthermore, the intimacy and personal attention of a small class in a small school, offers him the freedom and the opportunity to "realize his best and most articulate self among other able and articulate selves."

Needless to say that the selection of the most talented students from the entering freshman class of close to 400 students is no easy task. The English Department has been using five criteria for the selection of fifteen students for the freshman honors class. Under this plan, a student may receive the following maximum number of points for each of the following five criteria:

High school English grades (A/B):	30 points
Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), Verbal Part:	20 points
Achievement Test in English Composition:	20 points
California Reading Test (administered by LRC):	20 points
Special Composition Test (administered by LRC English Department):	30 points

The points each student receives in all five areas are added, and the top fifteen students with the greatest number of points are chosen for the freshman honors class. On the basis of the first three criteria we invited the top 35-40 students each year

to take the Special Composition Test of the English Department, if they were interested in taking the freshman honors course, I am happy to say that in each of the last three years all but two or three students were willing to meet the challenge instead of taking the regular freshman English courses. Let me emphasize that any possible charge of favoritism in the selection of these honors students would be without foundation, because every student taking the Special Composition Test is assigned a number for his test papers by the professor supervising the tests. All other professors of the English Department who grade these tests, therefore, do not know the students' names. Only after the final selection by numbers has been made, will the students' names be revealed. After that, I can guarantee you, they will not be numbered by their instructors, but will be known.

Though we found this selection procedure to be working well, we realize that test scores can never reflect fully a student's motivation, determination, and deep concern for a genuine education. We would, therefore, appreciate greatly your cooperation. You, our high school colleagues, would render a great service not only to the English Department of Lenoir Rhyne College but also to all colleges that offer honors programs, if you would state on a student's transcript "Recommend for English honors" provided you are convinced that he is qualified for such a program. We would even more appreciate a letter of recommendation from you if this superior student to your knowledge needs and deserves all possible financial support and might be able to arrange an interview with us.

Encouraged by the excellent student response to our freshman honors program and the statement of the Board of Trustees "that Lenoir Rhyne College has reached a level of enrollment, and the point of development and expansion of its physical plant that for the immediate future the resources of the institution should be directed primarily toward the strengthening and improvement of the educational program of the College," the Department of English with the approval of the faculty and the administration extended its honors program to the sophomore, junior, and senior levels.

Each member of the English Department will nominate those students from his freshman classes who have at least a 3.0 GPA and who would benefit from and contribute most to the sophomore honors program. The final selection is made by the entire department. Presently 17 students are enrolled in the sopho-

more honors course in English literature. Whereas the honors courses on the freshman and sophomore levels are open to all qualified students regardless of their majors, the Junior-Senior Honors Seminar is for English majors only. This program is designed to stimulate academic excellence by providing an opportunity for unusually able students to work for graduation with honors in English. In this program, in which the colloquium, or the seminar is at the heart of the honors method, we hope to generate a "living dialogue, the confrontation of ideas and values with all the vigor, sincerity, and aplomb of which superior students are, or can become, capable." Presently eleven students, selected by the English Department, are enrolled in the Junior-Senior Seminar, five of them with a GPA between 3 and 3.5 and six of them with a GPA between 3.7 and 3.9.

To avoid duplication and achieve coordination in the honors program on all levels I appointed Prof. Glenn E. Whitesides, who with enthusiasm and competence has contributed greatly to our honors program, Director of the Honors Program in the Department of English. It is he who directs the Junior-Senior Honors Seminar, which, however, is taught during the junior year by seven additional members of the department, because, to quote J. W. Cohen: " . . . breadth and excellence are mutually compatible goals to strive for. But this fact has largely been forgotten in the rush to develop specialists."

The Director teaches at the beginning of the semester methods of research and independent study. Then the other professors teach for nine class periods each their special fields in world, English, and American literature. The emphasis lies discussion, "ideas in action," critical thinking and evaluation. As the student participates in these discussions, he will begin to decide on *his* special area of interest in which he will, during his senior year, do independent study and research and write a senior thesis. The student's major professor, to whom he will be assigned by the Director, will direct the senior thesis, which must be read and approved by a departmental faculty committee of three, including the major professor, and be defended orally by the student. Upon approval of the thesis, the student will be assigned a grade for his six credit hours of work in the Junior-Senior Honors Seminar and — if he receives a grade of "B" or better — will be designated as a graduate with honors in English at commencement exercises.

Nobody has contributed to honors programs in the USA dur-

ing the last ten years more than J. W. Cohen, Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS), an organization that existed from 1957 to 1965. The publication of this organization, *The Superior Student,* and Cohen's book *The Superior Student in American Higher Education,* published 1966, have proven to be of the greatest value for the improvement of old or the establishment of new honors programs in the USA. Though we have in our own English honors program not yet been able to implement all of Cohen's "sixteen major features of a full honors program," we are convinced that our program is sound and will prove successful. We are also aware that after an honors program has just come into being we must avoid the temptation "of performing a major operation upon the infant immediately after it utters its first cry of distress," regardless how shrill the shriek is or from which corner it comes. Nevertheless, our new honors program will need — as all educational programs — evaluation and, maybe, revision based on gathered experience. Time does not permit me to speak about the problem of evaluating honors programs in detail. The question is not "should we evaluate" but "how do we do it best?"

As a beginning I appointed a Student Honors Committee on which one representative of each of the four honors courses serves. Each semester this committee will submit an evaluation report to the Director of Honors. In addition, I appointed a Faculty Honors Committee on which the instructors who teach the different honors courses serve. This committee will also submit a written evaluation report with possible recommendations each semester . Furthermore, each student in each honors course will have the opportunity to answer the following three questions in writing without being obliged to give his name:

1) What do you like about your honors program?
2) What do you dislike about your honors program?
3) What do you suggest to improve your honors program?

We realize that this is only a short-range evaluation and that a long-range evaluation in depth would also be desirable. We read, however, in Cohen's book mentioned above " . . . that formal comprehensive appraisal of honors programs are still rare. Of the 113 directors of honors programs in colleges and universities who replied to the survey questionnaire more than 80% said that in their institution verbal comments on the honors program are solicited from honors students and faculty and

some attempt is made to determine whether selection criteria are valid." We will try to do a little better, because faculty and student comments we do get unsolicited, mostly, however, expressions of deep involvement and genuine interest. But this present interest or even enthusiasm on the part of students and faculty is not enough. For any honors program to survive it must — and I quote Walter D. Weir, Director of Honors University of Colorado — " . . . receive the *continuous* support of administration, faculty, and students. Though a program may continue for a short time on the steaming fire of dedication and enthusiasm, it will not last very long unless the administration is willing and able to provide adequate financing and recognize in very concrete ways the effort put into the program by the faculty. Faculty members are too busy and too human to teach honors classes effectively for a very long time on an overload basis. Any program that does not count honors teaching as a part of the standard teaching load will soon contract the sickness of mediocrity. The same fate awaits programs whose professors do not receive recognition for their work in the form of salary increases, promotion, and tenure."

I am happy to say that the administration of Lenoir Rhyne College has fully recognized the necessity for financial support of the honors program at our college. It has provided for a budget of $37,000 for honors programs for the next three years. I was informed by President Cromer that this amount will probably be substantially supplemented, especially the amount to be spent for sizable scholarships for prospective honors students entering the college.

Many of you may be wondering by now why all these resources and so much attention of faculty and administration are given to the superior student. Some may agree with a young instructor at another college who said: "The thing that gets me down is this college-wide concern for the superior students. Maybe I am all wrong, but I like to think that my job is to discover the superior in the average. If we don't watch out, the colleges aren't going to do a thing for just the rank and file students. After all, it's the average men and women who make this country." Mary Ellen Chase, Professor of English Emeritus at Smith College, says that this teacher is a "voice crying in the wilderness," and then she adds: "With Advanced Placement, National Merit Scholarships, and grants from scores of conscious-ridden industries, the C student in our colleges might just as well leave to drive a truck or to fill a car with

gas. No one thinks he has a chance at real learning . . . but let us all remember, he is going to give our American communities their values, elect our Presidents, and stamp our country either as civilized or barbarous . . . I happen to believe that some of them (the average) can be superior. Let's not kick them out before we have discovered whether or not they have within them the dreams, visions, and powers, not at first evident to our superior academic minds! In many cases they don't have such powers — that's sadly true — but in many other cases they do; and . . . it's up to us to discover them . . . ."

Besides the fact that most truck drivers earn more money than most of our public schoolteachers do — which is a sad commentary on the scale of values in our society — I agree with J. W. Cohen who writes: "I believe that Miss Chase is right in her warning and in her aim, but I doubt that she has ever considered another and perhaps, even a better way towards its realization. I should like to suggest to her that only if one builds in proper curricula approaches and climate for the best and the good students on a campus will one also generate the conditions that will discover her 'superior in the average.' " Mr. Cohen believes that there will be a "spill-over effect" from the honors students on the rest of the students who will benefit from a visible honors program, which will have a strong influence on the latently strong among the student body. He thinks that " . . . the great danger in the absence of a program for the superior is further deterioration of all." I cannot but agree with Mr. Cohen that the honors students can generate a "radiation effect" on the general student body and that an honors program will "provide a focus of interest, motivation, and engagement to attract other students not yet part of it."

Since an honors program is not only concerned with knowledge but with 'knowledge for what?' I am convinced that it will bring about changes in attitudes and values for all students, changes for the better, changes which "include value commitments embracing intellectual, aesthetic, moral, social, and religious values."

We should not complain when finally our institutions want to provide opportunities for the superior student when for decades they have — perhaps owing to some false conception of what a democratic system of education entails — been trying with patience and tremendous cost to raise the level of the failing or conditioned student through remedial work. According to Cohen, "estimates of the ratio of special expenditures on the

retarded to those on the student of high ability range from 10 to 1 to 100 to 1 (the latter was made by a statistician in the Office of Education four years ago)."

"Education for everybody" means just that: for everybody, including the superior student. We should continue to strive for the "democracy of opportunity and the aristocracy of achievement."

A final word about the teacher in an honors program. "It is a commonplace now to point out that the art of teaching is becoming less important in higher education. The most upsetting thing about this is that it does not upset us enough," Cohen states. It is also well known that in the biggest universities the teaching of undergraduates is left to "harassed and unprepared students," a procedure Jaques Barzun calls a "fraud." In other words, we find in many of these schools "a superior faculty with an inferior concern for undergraduate teaching." It is also known that it is an accepted practice to give promotions for research to men appointed and salaried for teaching, teaching which is deemed inferior to research and considered by some professors a necesary evil that takes away from their research project. In fact, the paradox exists that, to quote Barzum from his book *The House of the Intellect,* "The highest prize of the teaching profession is: no teaching. For the first time in history, apparently, scholars want no disciples." Though I am certainly not against research, I think it is high time to realize that the main purpose of all teachers on all levels is to teach. And to teach at their very best is the challenge the honors teachers have to meet. The honors program stirs out of lethargy all members of the faculty who have the power to contribute to it. It taps all of our latent resources and avoids undue smugness and complacency that leans on past achievement. But if we meet this challenge in the honors seminar, in the "interplay of poise, gravity, humor, passion, controversy, "meet the Faustian spirit of rebellion and search for knowledge with patience and perseverance, understanding and love for our finest students, then we may also experience the deepest joy for achievement in the pursuit of excellence. We may even rediscover or strengthen our conviction that though ours may be the poorest paid, it is still, for those to whom it is dear for its own sake, the most rewarding of all professions.